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NEW VOICES IN CLASSICAL RECEPTION STUDIES
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**AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY JEALOUS WOMAN AND A TWENTIETH-CENTURY HYSTERICAL
DIVA: THE CASE OF MOZART'S *IDOMENEO* (1781) AND STRAUSS'S *ELEKTRA* (1909)**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines two examples of Electra's reception in the artistic medium of opera. The methodology used in this analysis involves examining the historical, socio-political and cultural context of each reception. That is then followed by a detailed comparative analysis between the original source and the adaptation. This method focuses on how the context of each reception influenced the changes made to the original.

In discussing Electra's treatment in opera two well known examples stand out: Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Strauss's *Elektra*.¹ These are the only two that still remain in the repertoire of operas that are regularly performed today.² Therefore they are of most interest as classics of the genre. There is an earlier opera called *Electre* by the composer Jean Baptiste Lemoyne dedicated to Marie Antoinette in 1782. Despite Lemoyne's efforts to flatter the queen and his use of the famous composer Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–1787) as a role model, his *opera seria* was met with universal critical rejection and was soon completely forgotten³ as were the other librettos in which Electra appeared as a minor character.⁴

Mozart's and Strauss's treatment of Electra, however, could not be more different.⁵ In Mozart's *Idomeneo*, first performed at the Court Theatre in Munich on 29 January 1781 (Clive 1993: 187–88), Elettra is a secondary character 'not essential to the story' (Hutchings 1976: 52). Strauss, on the other hand, makes her the protagonist of his eponymous opera first produced in Dresden on 25 January 1909 (Strauss 1997: 1). *Elektra* dominates the stage, as did Sophocles' Electra.⁶

The conventions that helped shape these two operas are very different, as will be discussed below, but they do have one thing in common: their musico-dramatic characterization of Electra as a raging virago. Graig Ayrey's comment that Mozart's Elettra: 'constantly appears *in medias res* in an explosion of emotion, as if her feelings can no longer be contained' (Rushton 1993: 144) is equally true of Strauss's *Elektra*.

The crucial difference is the length of those explosions. In Mozart they are just diversions from the main action⁷ but in Strauss they take centre stage, making his *Elektra* one of 'the most severe and the most cruelly taxing' soprano roles in the repertoire (Del-Mar 1962: 293). It is in the twentieth century that Electra became a protagonist again rather than a minor character. The changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century and women's campaign for the vote transformed the face of society. Freud's theories of hysteria (Freud and Breuer 1991) renewed interest in women ruled by extreme emotion, thus making Electra popular again for the very reason that had caused her loss of prominence before. By the beginning of the twentieth century artists were ready to tackle the character of Electra again and Strauss's *Elektra* belongs to that climate of change.

In the following discussion first *Idomeneo* and then *Elektra* will be examined in relation to the fifth-century BCE dramas that inspired them. As McDonald (1997: 314) puts it: 'Ancient tragedy was made to be performed and viewed. Opera can be used as an interpretative tool.'

The differences between the two operatic versions of Electra are mainly due to the fact that Mozart's opera belongs to the eighteenth century, while Strauss's *Elektra* is very much a heroine of the early twentieth century. The eighteenth-century world of opera was very different to that of Strauss's time. Some of these differences will be highlighted in the discussion that follows. Mozart's reworking of Electra, as the jealous Elettra, will be discussed first.

MOZART'S IDOMENEO: THE CONTEXT

It is important to remember that eighteenth-century librettists took great liberties with their classical texts (Headington et al. 1987: 95) and *Idomeneo*'s librettist, the Court Chaplain Abbate Giambattista Varesco, was no different. Mozart himself made many changes to the libretto because he was not happy with Varesco's draft, as his letters to his father Leopold show,⁸ but these changes had nothing to do with remaining faithful to the classical tradition.

In fact the story of Idomeneus' *nostos* is a minor incident in classical mythology. In extant sources Idomeneus is referred to as the king of Crete who fought in the Trojan War.⁹ Homer has him standing next to Aias in the battle line in the third book of the *Iliad* and he also mentions that he was the leader of the Cretans (Wyatt tr. 1999, *Iliad*, 3.230–3). With regard to his return journey the *Odyssey* mentions that he returned safely:

Idomeneus, too brought back all his comrades, all those
who escaped the war, he lost none to the sea.

(Dimock tr. 1995, *Odyssey*, 3.191–2)¹⁰

There are two versions of what happened on his return. One, given by Lycophron in the *Alexandra*, is that Idomeneus found out that his regent, Leucus, had killed his wife Meda and all his children (Mair tr. 1921, *Alexandra*, 1218–23). Apollodorus' *Epitome* supports this version of events, adding that, before Leucus killed her, Meda had been his mistress (Frazer tr. 1921, *Epitome*, vi. 9–11).¹¹ Apollodorus also says that Leucus drove the rightful king away. He mentions this story while listing unfaithful Greek wives, the most famous of whom was Clytemnestra. This comparison is interesting as it puts Meda's betrayal of Idomeneus in the larger context of Clytemnestra's more famous betrayal of her husband upon his return and links it with the story of Electra.

The second version, the one that Mozart's opera is based on, is not derived from a classical source but from a commentator of Virgil, Servius, a Latin grammarian and commentator of the early fifth century CE.¹² Virgil mentions that Idomeneus arrived safely in Crete but he gives no reason for his banishment (Gould tr. 1999, *Aeneid*, 3.121–3). It is Servius who mentions the story of the storm that nearly destroyed the Cretan fleet on its way home. Servius is also the one who mentions Idomeneus' vow to Neptune to sacrifice the first person he meets when he lands on Crete in return for Neptune's help in calming the storm, although he does not make it clear whether Idomeneus carried out the sacrifice in the end (Rushton 1993: 70).

This does not resolve the 'Elettra problem' (Rushton 1993: 156 and McDonald 2001: 76), however. The question is, what is the daughter of Agamemnon doing in Crete? From the opera's plot we infer that Elettra took refuge with the Cretans after Orestes' matricide. This becomes clear in Elettra's last aria where she speaks of joining her brother Orestes in Hades:

Ah no, let me follow my brother Orestes into the bottomless abyss. Unhappy shade, receive my spirit now; you will have me as a companion in Hades in eternal woe, in endless lament. (Mozart, *Idomeneo* 1996: 138–40)¹³

and suffering the torments of the Furies:

'Within my breast I feel the torments of Orestes and Ajax ...

Alecto's torch brings me death ...' (ibid. 140)

There is no classical source for this story. Orestes does not die in classical tragedy.¹⁴ Instead Athena in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* releases him from the power of the Furies. Sophocles' *Electra* ends with Orestes driving Aegisthus into the house to be killed. At the end of Euripides' *Electra* Castor sends Orestes to Athens to be purified, while at the end of his *Orestes* Euripides has Apollo perform the same function. As for the fate of Electra herself, Aeschylus does not offer any clues as to what happens to her after she goes back into the palace. Sophocles ends his *Electra* with his heroine helping her brother with his plan to kill Aegisthus, but as the play ends inconclusively Electra's fate is far from clear. Euripides in his *Electra* marries her to a farmer, and, by the end of the play, to Pylades. In his *Orestes* he has her supporting her brother against Menelaus and again has her marrying Pylades.

The answer to the question of why Electra is in Crete is not to be found in any of the classical sources but in *Idoménée* (1712), a French *tragédie lyrique* by Antoine Danchet. Danchet is the first author to associate the classical Electra with the story of Idomeneus' return to Crete (Rushton 1993: 71). In doing so, however, he ignores that this would mean that Idomeneus, like Odysseus, must have spent years trying to get back home, which is not supported by the extant classical mythology. Electra's presence is one of the factors that further complicate the chronological timeline: she had to wait for years for Orestes' return and only afterwards, according to the plot of *Idomeneo*, did she flee to Crete (Einstein 1946: 404). This anachronism is another example of just how freely eighteenth-century authors treated their classical sources.

The plot of Danchet's play, however, is of interest for the history of the reception of Electra (Rushton 1993: 72–4). Her role in Danchet's tragedy is quite different to that in Mozart's opera. In *Idomeneo* Electra is powerless: she is angry because Idamante prefers Ilia to her but there is nothing she can do except to vent her anger in song. In the earlier tragedy, however, she calls upon Venus, who is also angry with Idoménée, and her prayer has tragic consequences (Rushton 1993: 78). The king is struck by a fit of madness and kills Idamante. When he recovers, Idoménée wants to commit suicide, but Ilia kills herself instead. Thus Danchet's Electre has her revenge. Danchet's play was set to music by André Campra and performed in Paris in 1712, sixty-nine years before Mozart's version. Danchet's version was popular in the musical theatres of its time (Rushton 1993: 72) but it is Mozart's version that has had an enduring appeal.¹⁵

Mozart's version is very different from its predecessor not only in the way it presents Electra, but more importantly because *Idomeneo* belongs to a different genre of opera. Different conventions determined its style and content. In order to understand these conventions one has to look back to the birth of opera itself. Opera as a genre emerged around the beginning of the seventeenth century in Italy.¹⁶ It is very important to note that at its inception opera was closely associated with the classical tradition and in particular with the myth of Orpheus as popularized by Ovid.¹⁷ Various versions of the myth of Orpheus were used and new ones invented,¹⁸ for an opera was defined as an: 'expression of the affections in memorable music, and a finale that satisfied the expectations and emotional requirements of the audience.' (Sternfeld 1993: 25).

Thus from the very beginning the librettists and composers of the time set a precedent of changing the stories they had inherited from the classical tradition. The ways in which the classical stories were changed reveal much about contemporary attitudes.

Opera seria was a neoclassical reform of opera. Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), a poet and librettist, was the main force behind this reform (Heartz 1989: 71). His aim was to imbue opera with the classical ideals that inform classical tragedy in reaction to Baroque excess and display. Metastasio, with his classical education at the Arcadian Academy at Rome, wanted opera to observe Aristotle's three unities and the clarity, grandeur and purity of form he demanded. Metastasio's libretti were more literary than those of previous operas. It was 'an attempt to force

opera into the genre of tragedy.' (Heartz 1989: 71). That is why *Idomeneo* resembles Greek tragedy with its recitatives to advance the action, and its arias for commentary and reflection:

Ancient Greek tragedy was originally presented in alternating passages of spoken and sung verbal exchanges ... We see in operas by Mozart the obvious analogy with ancient tragedy, since he divides his libretto between arias and recitatives: the action moves forward in the recitatives, and we learn from the characters in their arias how they feel about these developments. (McDonald 1997: 312)¹⁹

This genre of formal grand opera developed by Metastasio was 'associated with the courts' (Ottaway 1979: 125). From its very inception opera had been 'connected with the centuries-old tradition of royal, ducal, and aristocratic pastimes' (Sternfeld 1993: 3) and Metastasio continued this tradition. Usually a noble patron commissioned an *opera seria* from a well known composer for a special occasion. *Idomeneo* itself was a paid commission by the Elector of Bavaria Karl Theodor for the Munich carnival season of 1781.

A crucial characteristic of *opera seria* was that it relied upon 'the remote ages of classical mythology and ancient history' (Hutchings 1976: 48) for its material (McDonald 2000: 67). Only such stories, where aristocratic heroes performed noble deeds with the help of the gods, were considered suitable. Castrati sang these roles because that was considered the only type of voice exalted enough adequately to represent heroes of such status.²⁰ In *Idomeneo* the role of the young prince Idamante was sung by the castrato Vincenzo dal Prato (Clive 1993: 188).²¹

Already by Mozart's time, however, *opera seria* was going out of fashion. Opera was becoming more democratic and Mozart was instrumental in guiding opera through this transitional period (Ottaway 1979: 124). *Idomeneo*, written when he was twenty-five, belonged to the old-fashioned school of opera,²² but his masterpieces *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) and *Die Zauberflöte* (1791) belong to the style of opera known as *opera buffa* (Ottaway 1979: 21), comic opera. Comic opera dealt with less exalted subjects so it was accessible to a wider audience. *Le Nozze di Figaro* shows the barber Figaro outsmarting his master and the plot revolves around the characters' love affairs. *Die Zauberflöte*, written for the Viennese popular theatre, was even more subversive, imbued as it was with the humanistic spirit that was so characteristic of the Enlightenment.²³

Opera therefore became not just a pastime for aristocrats but also for the people. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, opera performances were largely private and one could attend only by special invitation,²⁴ but that changed, as opera became more commercial.²⁵ *Opera buffa* reflected the ideals of the Enlightenment that came much later to Germany than to France and Britain, but it was characterized by the same 'humanistic assumptions' and 'man-centred world view'.²⁶ By its very nature *opera buffa* was subversive. Like in Aristophanes' comedies the audience is invited to laugh at contemporary institutions. In *Le Nozze di Figaro* Figaro and Susanna run rings round Count Almaviva, the representative of the old order and of aristocratic privilege. When Count Almaviva insists upon his rights of *prima nocte*, his servants and his wife outsmart him and foil his lust. Mozart is interested in exploring the individuality and humanity of each character equally, whatever their status. Thus Mozart brought a new democracy to opera (Ottaway 1979: 124).

It is interesting to compare *opera buffa* to Old Comedy. Like Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* some of Aristophanes' plays had contemporary settings. *The Knights* is just such a play: 'a satire on the whole nature of politics and political leadership in Athens' (Barrett and Sommerstein 1978: 32), and in particular of the demagogue Cleon who persuaded his fellow-Athenians to reject the Spartan offer of peace in 424 BCE for reasons of self-aggrandizement rather than for the good of the *polis*. Mozart, however, was never quite as bold as Aristophanes in his attacks against the institutions of his day. Mozart subtly ridiculed aristocratic characters like the Count Almaviva, but then in his comic operas he could afford to be a lot more daring than in *Idomeneo*, which, after all, was a commission

paid for by the Elector. It also seems likely that another nobleman, Count Zeill, recommended Mozart for the job (Winston R. and Winston C. eds. 1960: 275), so Mozart had to please his noble patrons. Nevertheless *Idomeneo* shows signs of the new democracy he would bring to opera with his later masterpieces.

Fifth-century BCE Athens was a democracy and its drama was a religious and civic institution, whereas Germany after the Thirty-Year War was still a 'feudal society' (Hutchings 1976: 10) divided into many small independent states whose rulers competed against each other. This fragmentation meant that each ruler guarded his privileges religiously and change was accepted much more slowly (Hutchings 1976: 11). In such a climate Mozart's position as a musician and composer was ambiguous. As a child prodigy the nobles of Europe had pampered him, but as a man he had to struggle to make a living and that meant belonging to a nobleman's entourage. His patron while he was composing *Idomeneo* was the Archbishop Hieronymous, Count Colloredo, Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg (1772–1803)²⁷ from whom he had to ask permission to leave Salzburg for Munich (Winston R. and Winston C. eds. 1960: 276).

After the favourable reception of *Idomeneo*²⁸ Mozart quarrelled with the Archbishop and subsequently left his service. 'The thorn of servitude pricked deep into his flesh' (ibid. 287): he felt that sitting at table with the servants, waiting to be called in to perform and not being allowed to perform for anyone else apart from Colloredo were humiliations that he could not endure. Modern appreciation of Mozart's genius might obscure the fact that Colloredo's behaviour was not unusual for a man of his position at the time, for before the French Revolution shook the world, the conflict between noble birth and the new emerging intellectual meritocracy had yet to be resolved. Thus *Idomeneo*'s success contributed to Mozart's decision to leave the Archbishop's service.

In fifth-century BCE Athens, too, playwrights had to adhere to certain rules and failure to do so could make them liable to prosecution for slander. Greek drama was an essential arm of Athenian policy (Cartledge 1993: 177; Easterling 1997: 205; Goldhill 2000: 40). The Great Dionysia attended by citizens of other *poleis* was a time for displaying the achievements and talents of Athens and its citizens (Vernant 1995: 210). Aristophanes, for example, was prosecuted in 426 BCE for slandering the city in front of foreigners with his play *The Babylonians*. Using the arts to promote a civic ideology and to display wealth and prestige was not restricted to fifth-century BCE Athens. *Opera seria* played a similar function in the eighteenth-century courts.²⁹ Putting on an expensive spectacle, such as an opera, was a display of power and wealth, so it had to suit the taste and political ambitions of its aristocratic patron. In the case of *Idomeneo* Mozart had to please the Elector since it was he who had commissioned the opera. This limited Mozart's creative freedom as he had no say in the choice of the libretto and the singers.

ELETTRA'S ROLE IN *IDOMENEO*: A CLOSE ANALYSIS

Having discussed the contemporary environment that shaped *Idomeneo*, the discussion will now centre on Elettra and her role in the opera. The plot of the opera revolves around Idomeneo's vow to Neptune to sacrifice the first person he saw, if he landed safely on Cretan soil. Unfortunately the first person he sees is his son Idamante and a struggle thus ensues between love and duty, typical of an *opera seria* (Ottaway 1979: 87).³⁰ The love story involves Ilia, a Trojan princess,³¹ and the prince Idamante. Elettra is a complication. She, too, loves Idamante and is jealous of Ilia whom she despises for being a Trojan. This subplot helps set up a conventional clash between two women, one of whom is obviously the right partner for the hero, and the other is her exact opposite. The function of the rival is to bring into sharper focus the desirability of the heroine as a perfect complement to the hero. In *Idomeneo* attention is drawn to Ilia's selfless love which is able to overcome even issues of ethnicity.³² This is accomplished by contrasting her with Elettra's attitudes as will be shown below.

Mozart simplified Elettra's role in his *Idomeneo*. In previous versions Elettra's role was more complex (Rushton 1993: 78–9), but in this incarnation she is just 'an enraged and jealous

bystander' (Rushton 1993: 78). Mozart also simplified the roles of the other characters except for Idamante who is similar to the hero of Danchet's version. Mozart's less complex story was better suited to court tastes. Elettra's first appearance sets the tone for the rest of her characterization in both dramatic and musical terms (Mozart, *Idomeneo* 1996: 62). She appears on stage to condemn Idamante's decision to free the Trojan slaves. Thus from the very beginning she allies herself with the conservative forces that would like to keep the antagonism between Greece and Troy alive despite the fact that Troy had been destroyed. Idamante's actions, on the other hand, show him to be an ally of the forces of Enlightenment, of progress freed from the hatreds and prejudices of the past. Elettra is a woman of the past while Idamante is a man of the future, which is why Ilia is a more fitting partner for him as will be shown below.

Elettra's reasons, however, are not just political they are also deeply personal. She is in love with Idamante and jealous because she knows that he prefers Ilia. In her first aria she reveals this clearly:

In vain, Electra, you love this ingrate ... shall
the daughter of a king, who has kings as vassals suffer
a lowly slave to aspire to these great honours? Shame!
Fury! Grief! I can bear it no more!

(Mozart, *Idomeneo* 1996: 64)

Like her classical predecessor, Elettra is a creature of negative emotions: rage and thoughts of vengeance are uppermost in her mind:

Let her who stole that heart
which betrayed mine
feel my fury
and cruel revenge.

(ibid. 66)

The music Mozart wrote for Elettra's first aria could almost be called 'modern' (Osborne 1997: 158)³³ with its 'vehement chromaticism' (Osborne 1997: 155) building up to a desperate climax. Interestingly Elettra's aria blends in with the music for the storm during which Idomeneo makes his bargain with Neptune. Elettra's anger is thus externalized (McDonald 2001: 75). At the end of her first aria: 'Tutte nel cor vi sento / Furie del crudo averno ...' [In my heart I feel you all / Furies of bitter Hades] (Mozart, *Idomeneo* 1996: 66-7) her music blends with the music for the next scene: the resurgence of the storm. This transition establishes in musical terms how similar Elettra's violent fury is to the fury of the storm. As Ayrey puts it, it is: 'a physical representation of Elettra's personal feelings.' (Rushton 1993: 141)

Elettra makes her next appearance in Act Two. Idomeneo, desperate to save his son, decides to send him to Argos with Elettra.³⁴ Elettra is not deterred by Idamante's coldness towards her. In fact she is convinced that she can win his love once he is away from Ilia and she is thus overjoyed to leave Crete behind. In this, like in everything else, she is presented deliberately as Ilia's opposite.³⁵ In fact this seems to be her role in the opera (Rushton 1993: 156). Ilia, heroic, humane and self-sacrificing is a fitting match for Idamante. She, too, is allied to the forces of Enlightenment by her ability to put aside old hatreds. At first Ilia is not sure whether to reciprocate Idamante's love but, unlike Elettra, she is able to forgive. She puts aside the hatred of Trojan for Greek and when Idamante frees her and her fellow-captives she comes to realize that he represents her best hope

for the future (Mozart, *Idomeneo* 1996: 60). His generosity marks the beginning of a change in their relationship: it forces Ilia to admit to herself her love for the Greek prince.

Elettra, on the other hand, cannot let go of her hatred for the Trojans and she is angered by Idamante's decision to release the Trojan captives. Elettra wants to preserve the *status quo*. She cannot forgive nor can she recognize that this is the best way forward for both Greek and Trojan. She stubbornly clings to the old prejudices. Ilia is prepared to sacrifice her own life to save that of Idamante but Elettra, even though she loves him, cannot make a similar sacrifice; the thought of her rival winning makes her furious. The classical Electra is equally inflexible when it comes to her desire for revenge, particularly in Sophocles' and Euripides' versions of the story. Her devotion to her dead father is a more heroic trait, though, than Elettra's jealousy. In Sophocles' play she refuses to stop mourning her father even when she is threatened with imprisonment (March ed. and tr. 2001, Sophocles' *Electra*, 378–84).³⁶ She is even prepared to risk her own life in an attempt to avenge him, when she believes Orestes to be dead. In Euripides' play she is less heroic and more selfish, but she too greatly desires revenge for her father's murder (Cropp ed. 1988, Euripides' *Electra*, 140–9).

At first Idomeneo supports Elettra's suit to his son but he changes his mind when he realizes that Ilia also loves his son³⁷ and that her love is selfless, unlike that of Elettra who cares not that Idamante prefers Ilia so long as he cannot have her. Elettra has no sympathy for his grief at being ordered to leave his country (Mozart, *Idomeneo* 1996: 100). In any case the monster, sent by Neptune to chastize Idomeneo for refusing to make the sacrifice, destroys all Elettra's plans. Instead of leaving with her Idamante chooses to leave alone at the end of the quartet sung in parallel with his father Ilia and Elettra (ibid. 113–21). Idamante faces and slays the monster. While Ilia is worried about Idamante, Elettra is once again furious that her plans have been overturned, which reinforces the contrast between the two women.

Elettra's love is thus proven to be of a selfish nature, whereas Ilia's love is selfless. Ilia puts Idamante's well-being above her own. This is proven beyond all doubt when she offers to take his place as a sacrifice to fulfil Idomeneo's vow to Neptune (Mozart, *Idomeneo* 1996: 136). Elettra is incapable of such a sacrifice. She is surprised by Ilia's selfless action and after Neptune's resolution she quits the stage in anger. Elettra is bitter because, as she sees it, her rival has won. Ilia, on the other hand, forsakes her old allegiance to Troy for the sake of Idamante's love (ibid. 110).³⁸ This selfishness is not a trait shared by the Aeschylus' and Sophocles' heroines. They are both devoted to the cause of avenging their father. Euripides' heroine is also obsessed by the loss of status she and Orestes suffered as a result of their father's murder (Cropp ed. 1988, *Electra*, 54–63). Euripides' heroine, however, is not afraid to die in the cause of revenge, if Orestes fails in his attempt against Aegisthus (ibid. 684–92). The same is true of the Electra of Euripides' *Orestes*, who is prepared to die with her brother (West tr. 1987, *Orestes*, 307–15). Her love for her brother is also particularly evident in that play. She looks after him while the Furies torment him. In *Idomeneo* the audience can only have 'limited sympathy' (Rushton 1993: 156) for Elettra. She is just a fascinating complication in an opera in which she has to be exorcized so that the forces of the Enlightenment can prevail.

A happy ending was 'obligatory' (Rushton 1993: 76) for Mozart's *Idomeneo*. Essentially it is a moral tale of the new replacing the old order. Idomeneo in a moment of crisis made an ill-considered vow to Neptune and he is punished for it. However, Idamante's courage in slaying the sea monster and his ability to lay aside the past by freeing the Trojan slaves, reveal that he is better qualified to be king. Indeed the voice of Neptune declares that he would be appeased, if Idomeneo abdicated in favour of Idamante: 'heaven contented and innocence rewarded' (Mozart, *Idomeneo* 1996: 139). The gods have a small but crucial role to play in *Idomeneo*. Neptune is both the catalyst and the solution to the action of the opera.³⁹ At the end he shows mercy and like Ilia and Idamante, the humanist protagonists, is able to put his hatred aside (Rushton 1993: 159).⁴⁰

This *deus ex machina* solution is reminiscent of Euripides' ending for his *Orestes*, where Apollo resolves the conflict between Orestes and Menelaus. In Euripides' *Electra* it is Castor and

Polydeuces, the Dioscuri, who give voice to the divine plan of mercy, but that play's ending is more ambiguous because brother and sister are still greatly distressed by their imminent exile and separation. Aeschylus in the *Eumenides* resolved the conflict in his trilogy by staging a trial in which Athena cast the final vote that freed Orestes from the Furies. Apollo again defended his protégé Orestes. Sophocles in his *Electra* offers a more ambiguous ending with Aegisthus going to his death.

The optimistic spirit of the Enlightenment as well as court tastes dictated Mozart's choice of ending. Danchet preferred a more tragic ending with both Ilia and Idamante dying at the end of his play (Rushton 1993: 73). In Mozart's *Idomeneo* they represent the hope for a better future. In the tradition of court entertainment the issue of kingship is important. Idomeneo might have to abdicate but his son Idamante will carry on the family line. Thus *Idomeneo* legitimizes the tradition of aristocratic privilege.⁴¹

Elettra's character is sacrificed so that this happy resolution can take place. Not only that but Mozart, worried about the length of the opera, decided upon 'the elimination of Electra's third-act aria' (Heartz 1974: 534), clearly demonstrating how unimportant Elettra was in the overall scheme of the opera. Mozart's attitude towards Elettra can best be summed up in his own words: 'It seems silly ... that they should hurry off for no better reason than to leave Madame Electra alone.'⁴²

This last aria is one of extraordinary power: Elettra, incensed at the way things were resolved, gives voice to one last outburst of rage before she quits the stage.⁴³ She remembers her brother Orestes' torment and fantasizes about committing suicide:

Within my breast I feel
the torments of Orestes and of Ajax;
or a sword
shall end my pain.'

(Mozart, *Idomeneo*, 1996: 141)

It is a very powerful exit and modern productions usually retain it but in Mozart's opera Elettra can be no more than a secondary character with powerful arias of rage and jealousy. It is in Strauss's *Elektra* that her character is allowed to expand and take centre stage.

As will be shown below one of the crucial differences between Mozart and Strauss, and one that determined their choice of heroines, is that Mozart believed that music should please its listeners whereas Strauss sometimes sacrificed melody to the demands of the drama. As Einstein (1946: 385) puts it for Mozart: 'music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear, but must please the hearer.'

Mozart aimed to please his aristocratic patrons because that would lead to further commissions. Some of the music he wrote for Elettra might be extreme for its time, but he did not build an opera based on this type of music as Strauss did. In contrast Strauss used a 'modernistic atonality' (Sadie 1992: 35) to make his Elektra a far more extreme character than Mozart's Elettra could ever be. It must be noted though that Strauss was influenced by contemporary tastes that favoured this more 'modern' type of music (this will be discussed later in this article). Mozart also 'tailored' his music to suit the voices of the singers he had to work with, even the old tenor Raaff whose voice was weak.⁴⁴ The soprano Elisabeth Wending sang Elettra (Clive 1993: 188). Strauss, on the other hand, sought a soprano who could sing the demanding role of his heroine. Eventually he found her in Annie Krull.⁴⁵

IDOMENEO'S RECEPTION

Idomeneo was one of Mozart's own personal favourite works (Robbins 1995: 35) but after an amateur concert version of it in 1786 (Clive 1993: 188) it was one of Mozart's least-often revived works largely because of its *opera seria* conventions. In the twentieth century *Idomeneo* was re-evaluated. It entered the repertoire only from the 1950s (Sadie 1980: 724), after having all but disappeared from the stage.

This change in operatic tastes began with Emperor Joseph II (1741–1790). He relaxed the licensing laws, which gave more freedom to composers and theatre directors. His action allowed private theatres to exist whereas before only the royals and the aristocracy could maintain theatres (Cole 1998: 113). These theatres relying as they did upon the Viennese public to survive had to cater to its taste and the public in the middle and later 1780s, preferred comic opera, as in fact did the Emperor (ibid. 113). Commercial opera meant that any one opera had to have several performances in order to become financially viable. *Die Zauberflöte*, more properly called a singspiel (a sung theatrical piece with music, rather than an opera), was produced for just such a theatre. It was the product of Mozart's long friendship with Schikaneder, the theatre's director⁴⁶ and it is indicative of the new more relaxed attitudes. This change in musical taste and in the very function of opera eventually led to the commercial environment in which Strauss composed his operas.

This is not to imply that Joseph II did not still use opera as an arm of his policy (Cole 1998: 112–13). After all *Die Zauberflöte* was written in German and thus justified the Emperor's belief that spoken drama could promote German culture and the German language. Italian was the language conventionally used in opera at the time, because opera as a genre began in Italy, but for opera to become more accessible to a wider public using the native language was a prerequisite. The classical Athenian drama festivals served the same purpose: they promoted Athenian culture and values. Athens was often portrayed as an ideal city where justice could be found. In Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, for example, Orestes has been sent to Athens to be judged by Athena. In accordance with the spirit of democracy Athena convenes a jury of citizens to help her decide the issue. Sophocles' and Euripides' versions are more ambiguous, perhaps because they wrote their plays during a darker time in Athens' history, but elements of this attitude still remain.

Opera seria gradually became extinct, to be replaced by comic opera. In fact it can be argued that *Idomeneo* is the last *opera seria* (Osborne 1997: 166)⁴⁷ although it is by no means a conventional example. Mozart pushed the boundaries of *opera seria* to their limits, influenced by Glück and his reforms (Einstein 1946: 410 and Hutching 1976: 49–51). *Idomeneo* stands at the threshold between the old style of *opera seria* and the new style of *opera buffa* that was gradually coming to dominate the Viennese opera scene. Mozart's *Idomeneo*, although generically an *opera seria*, also has elements of the new style. *Opera seria* 'has become an alien form' for modern opera audiences (Einstein 1946: 405) because it is culturally so remote from us, which is why Mozart is still better remembered for *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte*. If he had not composed for *Idomeneo* in true *opera seria* style, however, we would not have his Elettra at all, because she is a superfluous, stock character who appears only to satisfy the conventions of this style of opera (Einstein 1946: 405).

After the original production of *Idomeneo* the opera was rarely produced. Its full score was first published by Simrock in 1809 (Rushton 1993: 83) but it never excited much public interest. It is in the twentieth century that the real re-evaluation of *Idomeneo* began. The contemporary bias of Mozart as 'a model of Classical balance and proportion' (Ottaway 1979: 188) led to a critical re-examination of all of Mozart's work. This is a process that started at the beginning of the last century and has helped promote an image of Mozart as a classical composer of perfect form.

HOFMANNSTHAL–STRAUSS'S *ELEKTRA*: THE CONTEXT

Elektra's great monologue in the second scene of Strauss's eponymous opera reveals his choice of focus for his version of the Electra story. His Elektra is a 'dämonischen Rachegottin' [demonic goddess of revenge] (Schuh 1947: 23) obsessed with avenging the murder of her father.

Alone! Alas, all alone. Father has gone away,
buried in his cold grave ...
Agamemnon! Agamemnon!
Where are you father?

(Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 58)⁴⁸

Her obsession leads to madness, fulfilling the promise of Mozart's *Elettra*. Whereas the eighteenth-century composer only hinted at the depth of passion his *Elettra* was capable of, Strauss gave his heroine a free rein. The result is an opera that was considered 'extreme' in its own time.⁴⁹ Ironically the extreme nature of the work makes it very much a product of its time. Extremes were in vogue at the turn of the century in Germany, partly as a reaction to Kaiser Wilhelm II's desire for patriotic and conservative music (see Communi 1999).

Freud's psychoanalytical techniques and his writings on hysteria had cultivated the public taste for such a 'blood-curdler' (ibid.) as *Elektra*. Nietzsche's ideal of an 'Übermensch' combined with Richard Wagner's medieval romances with their monumental heroes and heroines created a love of the extreme in the opera-going public. Each of these influences on Strauss will be discussed separately below.

In the story of Electra, as reworked by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in 1903, Strauss found a worthy subject for his musical rebellion. Electra, transformed into Elektra by Hofmannsthal, became a woman ruled by her lust for revenge without any of the heroism of Sophocles' Electra, or her faith in the gods and fate. Elektra is a woman of pure passion. Strauss, following Hofmannsthal's model, created in Elektra his most extreme heroine and the music he composed for *Elektra* is his most 'modern' ever (Tambling 1996: 185).

Strauss had more artistic freedom than Mozart who was bound by a patronage system. The Elector of Bavaria gave Mozart the libretto of *Idomeneo* to rework for the Munich Carnival of 1781. Strauss, on the other hand, was dictated to at this point in his career by the public's taste for shocking subjects. Strauss capitalized upon this trend with his earlier scandalous opera *Salome*, produced in 1905, which was a great success.⁵⁰

The first of the contemporary ideas that seem to have influenced Hofmannsthal's reworking of the Electra story is Freud's psychoanalytical theories. In 1903 Freud's theories had not achieved the *kudos* that they enjoy today but he had published *Studies in Hysteria* in collaboration with Joseph Breuer in 1895 and his own *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. These two works form Freud's early formulation of the theory of the unconscious part of the mind.

Of relevance to this discussion is his theory that the unconscious mind is ruled by irrational and primitive desires of a sexual or destructive nature (Freud and Breuer 1991: 19–20). Hofmannsthal's Elektra is ruled by her desire for vengeance that turns out to be self-destructive. She ends her great monologue with the prophetic:

... and happy
is he who has children, that dance
kingly victory dances around his high tomb.
Agamemnon! Agamemnon!

(Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 60)

Within these words are buried the seeds of her own destruction, although she is unaware of the danger.

At this point it should be noted that Strauss did not make any drastic changes to Hofmannsthal's play. 'As a general rule Strauss cut the text where it was too wordy to make a good libretto' (Forsyth 1989: 26). In one of his letters to Hofmannsthal Strauss himself called him 'a born librettist' (Strauss and von Hofmannsthal 1961: 18). The playwright's style suited the composer's ideas about the sort of librettos he wanted.

Hofmannsthal seems to have read Freud and Breuer's *Studies in Hysteria*, before he wrote his *Elektra*, during a trip to Italy.⁵¹ It is interesting to note that his original plan, as he confided to Theodor Gomperz in the summer of 1902, was to write a two-part *Oresteia* (Forsyth 1989: 18). Nothing came of this, however; instead Hofmannsthal chose to concentrate on the story of Electra for his inspiration.

Freud's influence can be seen not only in Elektra's hysterical nature but in the whole tone of the play turned libretto.⁵² As Del Mar (1962: 290) aptly put it, Elektra is 'a morbidly psychological character study'. Hofmannsthal's tendency to over-identify with his characters made him receptive to psychoanalytical theories that explored the inner psyche and its workings. His own fascination with death explains why his version is so morbid (Jefferson 1973: 110).

In the scene where Elektra confronts her mother Klytämnestra, Freud's influence is again felt. The importance of the mother–daughter relationship is shown by this lengthy episode that forms the centre of both Hofmannsthal's play and the opera. Hofmannsthal departed from his classical model when he portrayed his Klytämnestra as a woman who has repressed the memory of her murder of Agamemnon:

And yet, between day and night when I lie with my eyes open, something creeps over me

...

... it is so horrible that my soul wishes to be hanged and every part of my body cries out for death.⁵³

(Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 82)

Klytämnestra is haunted by nightmares but unlike the classical Clytemnestra she does not refer to her murder of Agamemnon or her reasons for committing the crime. No mention is made of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. Thus Strauss's Klytämnestra is a hysterical and diseased woman very different from her classical predecessor.⁵⁴ She indeed shares a closer kinship with Freud's hysterical patients whom he examined for his study.

The influence of Nietzsche on Hofmannsthal's work is also marked. On the issue of revenge, for example, which is the main theme of the libretto, it is interesting to compare Nietzsche's distinction between different types of revenge. The one that most fits Hofmannsthal's Elektra is what Nietzsche calls 'restitutional revenge', defined as a desire to hurt an opponent, not to prevent further harm to oneself, but to avenge a wrong:

To secure himself against further harm
is here so far from the mind of the revenger
that he almost always brings further
harm upon himself and very often cold-bloodedly
anticipates it.

(Nietzsche 1977: 153–4)

Elektra, particularly when she decides to avenge her father's death herself after she hears the news of Orest's supposed death, is emblematic of this principle of revenge.

Nietzsche's philosophy of 'will to power' (Ibid. 11) can also be detected in Hofmannsthal's heroine. The intensity of her desire for revenge, no matter what the cost, makes Elektra such a monumental character. It is interesting to note, however, that, for all her intensity, Elektra does not actually commit the matricide. She tricks Aegisth into entering the palace, but she does not strike the killing blow. She is the principal 'agent of retribution' (Osborne 1988: 65) but Orest is the actual avenger. In this, Strauss's Elektra again resembles the Electra of Sophocles.

It is in Elektra's maenadic dance of triumph that she most resembles Nietzsche's concept of the 'Übermensch', the Dionysian man (Nietzsche 1977: 11). According to this view, life means suffering and the operatic Elektra suffers with such intensity that she seems to will her own death. Nietzsche's ideas had a great impact on Germany in general (Tambling 1996: 163). Strauss himself composed a tone poem after Nietzsche: *Also sprach Zarathustra* in 1895–6.

The most important influence on the music of Elektra is Richard Wagner (McDonald 2001: 6).⁵⁵ Many of Strauss's contemporaries believed that: 'the mantle of Wagner has fallen on Richard Strauss' (Roseberry 1976: 285).⁵⁶ In Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* the romantic apotheosis of the *Liebestod* created two monumental central characters that enact their love and death on stage.⁵⁷ Elektra shares this monumental quality. The death of the heroine after a maenadic dance 'takes its place in a long Romantic tradition of wordless operatic climaxes' (Forsyth 1989: 43). The orchestra takes over in the end as all the voices fade.

Another device that Strauss adapted from Wagner is the use of *leitmotif*. Strauss associated certain keys with certain characters or emotions. One of the most successful uses of this technique in *Elektra* is the Agamemnon theme. It first appears in Elektra's great monologue. This musical theme haunts the opera in the same way that the ghost of Agamemnon haunts his daughter. Crucially the Agamemnon motif is heard at the very moment that Orest kills his mother, after Elektra's scream of encouragement (Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 134).

Elektra herself has her own musical theme, as do all the principal characters in the opera. Strauss, however, does not simply imitate Wagner. His *Elektra* does not sound like a Wagnerian opera. In fact the sound of *Elektra* is very 'modern'. Even Jeremy Tambling, who holds a very negative view of Richard Strauss and his work, admits that when it was first performed in 1909 *Elektra* was at the forefront of musical developments (Tambling 1996: 163).

A neoclassical resurgence in contemporary Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire is what determined the choice of the story of Electra as the subject of a play and it proved popular enough to be successfully transformed into an opera. In the eighteenth century Goethe wrote *Iphigeneia*, the classic play of German neoclassicism that inspired later playwrights like Hofmannsthal.⁵⁸ The play was the most prominent manifestation of a renewed interest in the Classics in academic and artistic circles. The Classics enjoyed a renewed popularity from that point onwards. This led indeed to their inclusion in the school curriculum.

The Classics were taught at the Gymnasium level, the equivalent of grammar school that prepared its students for entry to university. Strauss attended the Ludwigsgymnasium: 'which instilled in him a lifelong reverence for classical culture' (Sadie 1992: 565). Hofmannsthal was even better educated and, after writing a few short plays, he seems to have decided to concentrate on what he was best at: reworking older pieces of literature: 'using material that was a familiar part of European cultural heritage' (Osborne 1988: 60). He was a modern follower of classical ideas of creative imitation.

It is interesting to note that Hofmannsthal reworked the Oedipus legend for an eponymous play in 1906 (Mann 1964: 67) and one of Strauss's earliest works is a chorus from Sophocles' *Electra* dating from his time at the Ludwigsgymnasium (Sadie 1992: 565). *Elektra* was the first of two

operas based on the Greek Classics on which Strauss and Hofmannsthal collaborated, the second is *The agyptische Helena* produced in 1927.

A reverence for the Classics did not mean that reworking classical material was seen as inappropriate. Just the opposite in fact: it was seen as a way to keep the Classics alive. The theatre director Max Reinhardt,⁵⁹ who directed both Wilde's *Salome* in 1902 and Hofmannsthal's own *Elektra* a year later, best summed up the general feeling that classical plays were 'lifeless' for contemporary audiences because of the 'statuesque style of the period' (Mann 1964: 68).

Instead the audiences of the time preferred new versions of classical plays with which the educated class was familiar (ibid. 76). Thus it was easier for them to distinguish the new material from the old than it is for a modern audience. This is another similarity with fifth-century BCE Athens where audiences enjoyed seeing new versions of familiar myths. The myth of Electra, for example, in the extant plays was reworked by each of the three great tragedians, and twice by Euripides.

THE HOFMANNSTHAL-STRAUSS *ELEKTRA*

These four contemporary influences put Strauss's *Elektra* at the forefront of the development of opera at the beginning of the last century. Within this context it is interesting to look at how Hofmannsthal and Strauss modified the classical Electra in order to turn her into the operatic Elektra. Hofmannsthal's model for his play is Sophocles' version. The poet himself describes how, after reading Sophocles in the autumn of 1901: 'I allowed my imagination free play with the character of Elektra, not without a certain pleasure in contrasting it with "the devilishly human" atmosphere surrounding Iphigenia.' (Osborne 1988: 61).⁶⁰

The character of Electra, particularly as presented in Sophocles' eponymous play, was attractive because she allowed Hofmannsthal to introduce a 'modern' psychological dimension. Hofmannsthal found her a more interesting character than Iphigeneia whom Goethe had chosen for his play.

Hofmannsthal's play with its hysterical heroine and its psychological dimension bears a resemblance to Strauss's earlier opera *Salome*. Strauss was worried about this similarity as his letters to Hofmannsthal show. He would have preferred to follow *Salome* with a comedy, or at least to set a different subject to music before composing the music for *Elektra*. Hofmannsthal, however, persuaded him that the similarities were superficial.⁶¹ This fascination with hysterical women was very much a contemporary concern influenced by the work of Freud. It also influenced many of the changes that Hofmannsthal made to Sophocles' *Electra*. At this point it is important to stress again that Strauss followed Hofmannsthal's play closely with only minor changes which will be discussed where relevant further on.

Hofmannsthal's Elektra dominates the stage in the same way that Sophocles' Electra does. She first appears on stage in the second scene after the interlude with the five maids and stays on stage throughout the play. The interlude of the five maids who discuss Elektra is Hofmannsthal's own invention and replaces Sophocles' opening. In the classical play Orestes, Pylades and the old slave discuss how best to proceed, thus setting the scene for what is to follow: the matricide and the murder of Aegisthus. Hofmannsthal was less interested in the avenger of the House of Atreus. His focus is on Elektra and an opening where she is the subject of the maids' gossip shifts the emphasis on to her.

In the opera this is particularly noticeable as the female voice dominates throughout. The high soprano role Strauss composed for Elektra makes her stand out musically. Moreover, until the male servant appears on stage to call for a horse to take him to Aegisth with the false news of Orest's death (Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 102), no other male voice has been heard. At this point the opera is just over half way through.

Strauss had a great admiration for the female voice and he tends to favour it in his operas.⁶² Part of the reason for this is his long and happy marriage to Pauline de Ahna, a professional soprano. Hofmannsthal's play with its prominent female protagonist would have appealed to Strauss, enabling him to compose what is still one of the most striking soprano roles. Strauss's instructions to the conductor of the first production of *Elektra*, Ernst von Schuch, were to engage the highest and most dramatic soprano that could be found (Osborne 1988: 62).

The Hofmannsthal–Strauss *Elektra* shares her classical predecessor's intensity and her desire for revenge with one important difference: she is completely obsessed by her desire to avenge her father's murder, to the point where she brings about her own 'self-willed' destruction (Sadie 1992: 569).⁶³ Such is the intensity of her obsession that after Oreste kills her mother and Aegisth she too collapses and dies.

Sophocles' *Electra*, on the other hand, is not simply obsessed with revenge. In her universe there are gods to whom she appeals for help to right the wrong done to her House:

May the great Olympian god
bring them suffering in return, may they
never be free to enjoy their splendour
they who committed such acts.
(March ed. and tr. 2001, *Electra*, 209–12)

In Hofmannsthal's vision there is no room for gods, his is a bleaker universe where his heroine cannot hope for divine intervention. All her hopes rest with her brother. Thus Hofmannsthal simplifies his original but intensifies the force of the remaining motives that direct his characters' actions and he explains them in terms of psychological causation.

Similarly the emphasis in Hofmannsthal's vision is not on the revenge of Orestes. Sophocles' play ends with Orestes killing Aegisthus while the Chorus is praising him:

Oh offspring of Atreus, you have emerged out of suffering
into freedom, your purpose achieved today.

(ibid. 1508–10)

Aeschylus ends with the procession of Athenian citizens celebrating the justice of the city. Euripides, on the other hand, prefers a more ambiguous ending where the avengers are assured of a happy future, but they still lament their exile and separation from one another. Hofmannsthal chose to end his play with his heroine dying on stage after a maenadic dance, while Chrysothemis' cries to Orest go unanswered. The Furies are already at work.

Elektra's passion for revenge thus achieves monumental proportions. This effect is strengthened by the music that Strauss composed for her. *Elektra* represents: 'the farthest point for its composer ... in his experimentalism with extreme musical techniques' (Del Mar 1962: 332). It requires an orchestra of well over a hundred musicians to achieve its 'crescendo effect' (Forsyth 1989: 36), an escalation of the musical tension to the very end. This corresponds to and enhances the increase in tension in Hofmannsthal's original. *Elektra*'s role in particular is full of dissonances that reveal her deranged nature.

When *Elektra* first appears on stage she is in a near-bestial condition. She sings of her hatred for her father's murderers and her longing for him.⁶⁴ Sophocles' *Electra* is more dignified and self-possessed when she first appears on the stage, although it soon becomes clear that she has been ill-treated. *Electra* appeals to the gods for revenge. Sophocles' heroine is certainly a more forceful

character than Aeschylus' Electra in the *Choephoroi*. When the Aeschylean Electra first appears she is a more subdued figure: a daughter dutiful to her father's memory and a devoted sister. She carries the libations sent by her mother to appease the ghost of her father. She asks the Chorus's help to prevent that from happening. When Euripides' heroine first appears on the stage she immediately draws attention to the hardships that she has had to endure as a result of the murder of her father.

Aeschylus' influence on Hofmannsthal can be detected not in the details of the story but in poetical terms. As Forsyth (1989: 27) puts it: 'the diction, imagery and symbolism of the whole work have the flavour of Aeschylus', particularly the blood imagery in Elektra's opening monologue:

They struck you dead in your bath, your blood
run over your eyes and steamed the bath.

(Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 58)⁶⁵

The image of the bloody bath is equally strong in Klytämnestra's rejoicing after the murder of Agamemnon:

Falling, his life ebbed away as he breathed out great spurts of blood, which struck me with
a murderous drizzle.

(*Agamemnon*, 1388–90; my translation)

Strauss's *Elektra* does not offer its audience any of the redemption offered by Aeschylus. In Aeschylus' version Orestes' acquittal by Athena ends the cycle of violence in the House of Atreus. Sophocles' play ends ambiguously, but there are ominous signs. In Euripides' *Electra* Orestes is told by Castor that he has to go to Athens to be judged and acquitted by Athena. Electra is given in marriage to Pylades. They both have to go into exile, though, and they are separated from one another.

A fifth-century BCE Athenian audience would have viewed Elektra's death as a condemnation of the way she supported her brother in the killings of Klytämnestra and Aegisth (Forsyth 1989: 23). Forsyth also interestingly speculates whether the reason for Hofmannsthal's choice of ending was to provide Getrud Eysoldt with a strong final curtain (ibid. 24). However, Elektra's death provides a dramatically satisfying ending to Hofmannsthal's play and to Strauss's opera in particular. The conventions of Romantic tragic opera that Strauss inherited from Wagner demand the death of at least one of the protagonists.

Another important change that Hofmannsthal made is to the relationship between mother and daughter. In Sophocles Clytemnestra defends herself against Electra's accusations. She admits that she killed her husband and she gives her reasons for the murder:

Justice was his killer, not I alone,
and if you had sense you would take her side.
That father of yours whom you are always mourning,
he alone out of all the Greeks could bring himself
to sacrifice your sister to the gods, though his pain
when he sawed her was not equal to my pain in giving birth to her.

(March ed. and tr. 2001, *Electra*, 528–33)

Aeschylus' Clytemnestra is an even stronger character partly because in *Agamemnon* the audience sees her plot and execute the murder of her husband (the audience would not have seen her commit the actual murder. It took place behind the closed doors of the palace as the dramatic conventions of the time demanded). Afterwards she faces the Chorus and justifies her actions. Euripides' Clytemnestra is a weaker character and her motives are more selfish, although she does try to put forward her case in the *agon* (Cropp ed. 1988, *Electra*, 1011–56).

Hofmannsthal's Klytämnestra does not resemble her classical predecessor.⁶⁶ In her first appearance on stage: 'The queen is covered over and over with gems and talismans' (Hofmannsthal 1908: 19) to help relieve her guilt over an action she cannot even remember ([Fig. 1](#)). She makes no reference to Iphigeneia nor offers any other self-defence. She thus becomes a much blacker character. This is a woman whose ruin is 'primary spiritual' (Mann 1964: 84). The music Strauss wrote for the role emphasizes this corruption.

Elektra easily triumphs over this shell of a woman. Klytämnestra is seeking a cure for her nightmares, the product of a guilty conscience. Elektra lures her in by hinting that she knows of a cure: the right sort of sacrifice is needed. Pretending to be reluctant to reveal what she knows, she answers her mother's desperate:

I will find out,
who must bleed so that I can sleep again.

with a triumphant:

Who must bleed? Your own neck
when the hunter catches you.

(Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 94)

The triumphant notes in the music show that Elektra's victory over her mother is now complete. This scene of the mother–daughter confrontation forms the central part of the opera ([Fig. 2](#)).

Klytämnestra rallies again only when she hears the false news of Orest's death. Cruelly she does not tell Elektra: 'in order to be able to strike an even more painful blow against her later' (Bekker 1992: 394). Klytämnestra does not appear on stage again in Hofmannsthal's version⁶⁷ but the audience hears her screams as Orest kills her in the palace. In this Hofmannsthal followed Sophocles: the murders take place indoors where the audience cannot see but he gave his Klytämnestra no words.⁶⁸ Elektra's exultation, however, remains the same:

Strike once again!

(Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 134)⁶⁹

she shouts, reminiscent of Electra's:

Strike again with redoubled force.

(March ed. and tr. 2001, *Electra*, 1416)

Klytämnestra's character is thus weakened, ensuring that Elektra is a much stronger character. The matricide seems more justified because Klytämnestra is a less sympathetic character.

Three key characters in *Elektra*: Chrysothemis, Orest and Aegisth, are, however, much closer to the classical originals. Their roles remain the same: Chrysothemis is a foil for her sister (McDonald 1994: 112); Orest is the avenger; and Aegisth is the weak effeminate paramour, who deserves to die for his part in Agamemnon's murder.

The music Strauss composed for Chrysothemis is 'in effective contrast with that of Elektra, lighter and more lyrical in expression' (Osborne 1988: 66). Elektra's music, with its harsh dissonance, sharply contrasts with Chrysothemis' softer music. The latter is the weaker and more traditionally feminine sister, which accords with the classical tradition. Chrysothemis yearns for marriage and children (Strauss *Elektra* 1997: 66)⁷⁰ and warns Elektra to beware her mother's anger. She adopts the Sophoclean stance of submission:

Have mercy on yourself and for me!
Who benefits from this torment?
Your father, he is dead. Your brother will
never return home.

(Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 680)⁷¹

Compare the classical Chrysothemis:

I know that your judgment is correct and not my words;
but in order to live in freedom I must
obey those who have the power in everything.

(March ed. and tr. 2001, *Electra*, 338–40)

Both the classical Electra and her operatic version reject such advice, which they view as weak. In the opera Chrysothemis runs away when Klytämnestra appears. Her Sophoclean predecessor shows more courage: Electra persuades her not to carry out the libations in the way their mother ordered but to pray instead for justice for their father. Chrysothemis does not appear in Aeschylus' version nor does she make an appearance in Euripides' *Electra*. In the former the focus is on Orestes and Electra is a lesser character and in the latter Euripides prefers to concentrate on the differences between mother and daughter.

It is in the second encounter between the two women that their differences are most evident. Elektra determines to avenge her father's murder herself after she comes to believe the false news of her brother's death. In order to recruit Chrysothemis' help she tries to lure her by adopting traditionally feminine wiles: praising her physical beauty (Strauss, 1997: 110) and promising to be her most faithful servant (ibid. 112). She creates a fantasy where she is preparing her sister for her bridegroom, designed to appeal to Chrysothemis' ardent desire for marriage. Chrysothemis, however, runs away from her sister. In an opera that lacks a conventional love interest, this has all the markings of a 'seduction' scene (Del Mar 1962: 318). The music repeats Chrysothemis' theme, but it expands it, building up to a climax as Elektra tries to win her over.⁷²

Sophocles' Chrysothemis acts in the same way: she refuses to participate in Electra's plan. Electra answers her with:

I am envious of your common sense, but I hate your cowardice.
(March ed. and tr. 2001, *Electra* 1027).

As Electra/Elektra is about to put her plan into action, even without Chrysothemis' help, Orestes appears. Despite the strength of her desire for revenge Elektra does not take direct action.

Hofmannsthal follows the Sophoclean sequence of events but cuts the length of the recognition scene. For Strauss, however, the importance of the brother–sister reunion demanded something more, so he asked Hofmannsthal in his letter of 22 June 1908 to write a few more lines for it:

'I shall fit in a delicately vibrant orchestral
interlude while Electra gazes upon Orest
now safely restored to her ... Couldn't you
insert here a few beautiful verses until ...

switch over to the somber mood ... '

(Strauss and von Hofmannsthal 1961: 16)

The recognition scene (*anagnorisis*) is a 'lyrischen Ruhepunkt' (Schuh 1947: 25)⁷³ in an opera full of harsh dissonances and the only part of the opera in which Elektra reveals a gentler side. Sophocles' Electra also reveals a gentler side during the *anagnorisis*. It is interesting to note that many critics believe that this is the only moment in the play when Sophocles' Orestes reveals a softer side, too (Blundell 1989: 174). There are glimpses of it in Elektra's longing for the father in her monologue, but only with Orest can she put her hatred aside for a little while. Strauss made his music fit the action on the stage.⁷⁴

For *Elektra* Strauss needed music that would 'convey the exacerbated spiritual condition of his characters' (Sadie 1992: 35) which is why he used so many atonal devices, not because he wanted to create a new type of music. Despite the dissonances, there is still a 'secure tonal norm' (ibid. 35) that underlies the whole opera. The subject matter of the libretto—a vengeful daughter, matricide and murder—demanded extreme music, but, as the music for the recognition scene shows, Strauss was quite capable of composing more traditionally lyrical music, when the drama called for it.

Elektra's character and her extreme music, however, dominate the opera, so much so that Orest 'remains a sketch' (Bekker 1992: 380). He is the beloved brother and the avenger but it is Elektra who dominates the opera. By contrast, in Aeschylus Orestes is the protagonist in the last two plays of the *Oresteia* and Elektra just a pale shadow. Sophocles and Euripides bring Elektra to the foreground but Orestes is still an important character. In the early twentieth century artists such as Hofmannsthal were more interested in the character of Elektra than in Orestes, because of contemporary interest in Freud's theories about hysterical women.

Orest is still a dignified character, which is reinforced by Strauss's decision to make him a baritone. His role, however, has been simplified. There is none of the emotional conflict his classical predecessor shows when faced with the reality of the matricide. In Aeschylus Orestes hesitates before striking the fatal blow. At that crucial moment he turns to Pylades who reminds him of Apollo's oracle and he commits the matricide. In Sophocles Elektra urges Orestes on while he is killing their mother. In Euripides Elektra plays a more active role; she is the one who persuades her brother to proceed with the matricide.

It must be noted, though, that of the three tragic versions of the story it is Sophocles' avengers that display the least amount of internal conflict over the matricide. In Hofmannsthal's play Orest shows no such compunction and neither does Elektra. Strauss follows Hofmannsthal in making Elektra 'the principal agent of retribution' (Osborne 1988: 65). It might be Orest who strikes the fatal blow, but it is Elektra's desire for revenge that is the more memorable.

As part of the blackening of Klytämnestra's character Hofmannsthal shows her rejoicing when she hears the news of Orest's supposed death. In the classical models her relief is mingled with regret.⁷⁵ In Sophocles' play the audience hears how it was Electra who saved Orestes by smuggling him out of Argos after the murder of his father. Hofmannsthal blackens Klytämnestra's character further by having her send her son away and then pay to have him killed (Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 92). He escaped, the audience is not told how, but this is another reason why he would see the matricide as justified.

Another reason for Orest's anger is the awful condition in which he finds his sister. He does not recognise her at first; she looks like a slave, until he hears her lamenting his supposed death and her grieving for their father. Orest is appalled when he realizes she is his sister:

What have you done with your night?
Terrible are your eyes.

(Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 122)

This strikes a darker note than Sophocles' description of his heroine:

I am pining away childless
I have no husband to protect me, but
like a lowly slave I serve in the halls
of my father, in such ragged clothes
as these and I stand around empty tables.

(March ed. and tr. 2001, *Electra*, 187–92)

Compare also Euripides' Electra who shows a similar concern with her ragged appearance:

Look at my dirty hair
and my untidy dress,
are they appropriate for the daughter of Agamemnon
who conquered Troy.

(Cropp ed. 1988, *Electra*, 184–9)

The Sophoclean Electra was treated as a slave but she retained her regal dignity. Euripides' heroine is a far less elevated character. Out of gratitude to the peasant she performs the tasks required of a farmer's wife, but she is resentful. In the Hofmannsthal–Strauss treatment of the story, however, she has degenerated into a near-bestial condition.

After a much shorter recognition scene than in the classical plays,⁷⁶ Elektra proceeds to encourage Orest to commit the matricide. For the moment he seems to grasp the full significance of the crime he is about to commit but it is a much shorter moment of clarity than that experienced by the classical Orestes.⁷⁷ As in Sophocles the tutor appears to warn Orest to hurry in case they are recognized by their enemies. Orest goes into the palace to carry out the matricide and is not seen

again on stage. In Aeschylus' and Euripides' versions he comes out again to face the consequences of his actions. In Sophocles Orestes drives Aegisthus indoors so that he can kill him and the play ends while the murder is taking place.⁷⁸ The Chorus rejoices, but the effect is unsettling (March ed. and tr. 2001, *Electra*, 1503–10). Hofmannsthal is more explicit in his version. The audience only hears Orest's name called first, in honour of his victory, and then at the end; ominously, there is no response when Chrysothemis calls to him after Elektra's collapse.

Hofmannsthal makes the matricide appear more justifiable but still his Elektra dies and the Furies pursue Orest. There is no redemption in Hofmannsthal's vision. His choice of ending was 'poetic rather than dramatic' (Forsyth 1989: 26). Perhaps his fascination with death also contributed to this. In the opera it is a particularly fitting ending, but to a fifth-century BCE Athenian audience it would make no sense. It is only fully appreciated in its context: namely the early part of the twentieth century and in the light of Hofmannsthal's own pessimistic view of life.

Elektra dies because once her obsession, her desire for revenge, is fulfilled she has no other reason to go on living (Headington et al. 1987: 307). She dies in a triumphant, ecstatic dance because words are no longer enough to express the intensity of her emotions.⁷⁹ Strauss's crescendo effect makes this feeling audible: after her triumphant waltz she crashes down like a megalith. It is interesting to contrast the wild movement of Elektra's dance with the overall rather static feel of the rest of the opera.⁸⁰ Hofmannsthal's stage directions call for the main characters to move in a stately manner across the stage, there is not much movement. Only when Elektra snaps is she released from the stasis she has imposed upon herself so that she could cope with her wild emotions.

Feminist critics like Catherine Clément and Susan McClary see the ending of Strauss's *Elektra* in a negative light precisely because the heroine dies. Clément sees opera as a fundamentally misogynistic genre because: 'on the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing' (Clément 1989: 5; see also McClary 1989: xi). Clément (1989: 76) views Elektra as just an instrument of men's vengeance and another example of how women are repressed on the operatic stage (ibid. 77). McDonald's (1994: 106, 2001: 116–18) more positive reading of the opera and its ending is more constructive. She sees Elektra's *Liebestod* as a transcendental moment in which the operatic heroine is 'transubstantiated into music' (McDonald 1994: 121).⁸¹ Strauss's Elektra might be a terrifying figure, but she is no passive victim; she dominates the opera vocally. We might not like her, but we cannot help but admire her and her dedication to her father's *genos* (McDonald, 2001: 117).⁸²

Aegisthus's part in the ending of the Hofmannsthal–Strauss version is less important. Hofmannsthal even suggested that they omit him completely but Strauss disagreed (Strauss and von Hofmannsthal 1961: 12). Orest had to kill his mother's paramour, so Strauss simplified the action so that Aegisthus came in after Klytämnestra's murder, entered the palace and was killed in turn (ibid. 12; and Strauss 1997: 140–6). Aegisthus's character is as weak and effeminate as he is in the fifth-century BCE tragedies. In earlier mythology, like for example in Homer, he was the stronger partner in the murder of Agamemnon (March 1987: 85). It was he who set the trap for the king. His name, which means goat's strength, is indicative of this, but the classical tragedians preferred to highlight Clytemnestra's role in the murder of her husband and the issue of the matricide. They downplay Aegisthus' role.

Hofmannsthal followed in their footsteps but the scene in which Elektra tricks Aegisthus into entering the palace where Orest awaits him gave Strauss the opportunity to create a truly sinister operatic scene.⁸³ Elektra, pretending to be subdued, lights his way with a torch (Fig. 3). This follows Sophocles' play and also echoes the light-dark imagery of the *Oresteia* and particularly of the *Eumenides*. The music has references to the Orest theme and becomes more and more sinister, but Aegisthus does not realise who is waiting for him inside (Del Mar 1962: 328).

Aegisth reappears at the window near the end of the opera to shout for help and the music reprises the Agamemnon theme as Elektra shouts: 'Agamemnon hears you!' (Strauss, *Elektra* 1997: 146).⁸⁴ At this moment Elektra's revenge is complete. She begins her fatal dance. The Agamemnon theme is repeated four times after her collapse, evoking his spirit. His daughter's 'uncompromising loyalty to him led her to madness and death' (Del Mar 1962: 331) in a suitably Freudian ending. Strauss's version makes Elektra a paradigm for Freud's Electra complex (McDonald 1994: 119) and the late nineteenth-century obsession with hysteria and psychoanalysis.

ELEKTRA'S RECEPTION

In Germany audiences had been shocked and fascinated in equal measure by Hofmannsthal's play in 1903 (Goldhill 2002: 140) and opinion on Strauss's opera was rather mixed (McDonald 2001: 115).⁸⁵ In the nineteenth century a myth had been propagated in Germany which saw the German Volk as the descendants of the Dorians.⁸⁶ Hofmannsthal and Strauss attacked this 'myth of a Greek origin of German greatness' (Goldhill 2002: 175) by their portrayal of Electra as a hysterical diva who dies at the end of the opera.

Opinion on Strauss's *Elektra* was also divided when it premiered in Britain in 1910. *Elektra* was the first Strauss opera to be performed in Britain,⁸⁷ so there was a great deal of anticipation. It was 'the most discussed event of the year' (ibid. 108) and tickets for the opera were very hard to obtain.⁸⁸ Critical response however was rather mixed⁸⁹ and the opera sparked a quarrel conducted through newspaper articles between the critic Ernest Newman and Bernard Shaw (ibid. 166–72). The former abhorred it, while the latter was enthusiastic in his support of Strauss's opera (Headington et al. 1987: 308).

There was a profound sense of shock in both Germany and England because in his *Elektra* Strauss goes against the conventional way in which ancient Greece had been previously portrayed (Goldhill 2002: 112–13). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ancient Greece was set up as an example of the best in human endeavour and a defining moment in Western civilization (ibid. 137–8). Strauss's modernist music, Hofmannsthal's portrayal of Electra as a hysterical woman, consumed by her desire for revenge, and their Elektra's dishevelled appearance on stage (Figs. 2 and 3) all challenged the stereotypical way in which ancient Greece had been previously represented in music and on stage.⁹⁰

Modern critical opinion of Strauss's work as a whole is often negative but for the opposite reason to that which led his contemporaries to criticize him. Some contemporary critics did not like *Elektra* because it was considered too modern, its music too full of cacophony, its drama too shockingly bloody. Critics today accuse Strauss of being too conservative and some, like for example Tambling (1996: 162), have even accused him of being a 'fascist's lap-dog' because he remained in Germany when Hitler came to power. Henry Pleasants (1989: 18–28) even accuses him of destroying the genre of opera itself with the loudness of his music, which is reminiscent of the earlier criticisms.

It is true that after the huge success that was *Der Rosenkavalier* in 1911 Strauss lost his international appeal. This is partly explained by the strain of two world wars on the relationships between the European nations. Strauss himself also seemed less concerned with pleasing the public. The music he wrote for *Elektra* remains his most modern (Jefferson 1973: 116). In the last thirty years of his life Strauss became increasingly isolated musically (Sadie 1980: 222–34). His decision to remain in Germany during Hitler's regime further devalued him in the eyes of later critics, but as Sadie points out: 'for old Strauss, a professional composer of German operas for German companies and German audiences there was nowhere else to go' (Sadie 1992: 568).

Nor was his relationship with the Nazis a secure one. His music was liked but his artistic collaboration with Jews like Hofmannsthal and after his death with Stefan Zweig was frowned upon.

Strauss's daughter-in-law Alice was Jewish by Nazi standards and Strauss had to tread very carefully in order to protect her and his grandsons (Kater 1997: 206–11 and Sadie 1980: 222–3).

This later controversy should not lead a modern audience to underestimate the value of the Hofmannsthal–Strauss version. Osborne's (1988: 71) comment that *Elektra*: 'batters at one's senses with a vehemence which, one imagines, must be not unlike that with which the classical Greek drama assaulted its audiences.' is worth considering. The changes Hofmannsthal made were influenced by the ideas current at the time. Strauss's major achievement was the powerful music he composed for *Elektra*. Both firmly set Elektra/Elektra at the forefront of twentieth-century culture once again.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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Fig. 1: Klytämnestra (Anna Bahr-Mildenburg) from the original Hofmannsthal–Strauss' *Elektra* production, Max Reinhardt's Little Theatre, Berlin, 1903. Her costume is opulent and she is wearing many charms.



Fig. 2: Klytämnestra and Elektra: the Mother and Daughter confrontation. Hofmannsthal–Strauss' *Elektra*, Max Reinhardt's Little Theatre, Berlin, 1903.



[Fig. 3:](#) Elektra, pretending to be subdued, lights Aegisthus's way with a torch. From the original Hofmannsthal-Strauss *Elektra* production, Max Reinhardt's Little Theatre, Berlin, 1903.

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¹ A longer version of this article will appear in the monograph *Aspects of Electra's Reception: Ancient and Modern* to be published by the Institute of Classical Studies in 2008.

² Mozart's *Idomeneo* was revived in 2001 by the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Strauss's *Elektra* was included in the 2002–2003 season repertoire of the Metropolitan. The opera was also performed in the 2003 London Proms on 29 July.

It is interesting to compare the many appearances that Medea makes on the operatic stage in comparison to Electra. For an analysis of Medea in opera see McDonald's (2000: 100–18).

³ Of interest are Lemoyne's quiet ending as Orestes is pursued off stage by the Furies and his use of something akin to the leitmotif technique for his heroine (Sadie ed. 1980: 655–6).

⁴ Mozart's version is based on an older opera of the same title. This will be discussed further later on in this article.

⁵ In the interest of clarity, when discussing Mozart's character she will be referred to as Elettra, when the discussion turns to Strauss her name shall be spelt as Elektra. This is the standard spelling used by musical critics to help them distinguish between the operatic Electra and the Electra of classical tragedy.

⁶ Hugo von Hofmannsthal's play *Elektra* is an adaptation of Sophocles' version of the story (Headington et al. 1987: 306).

⁷ Mozart decided to delete Elettra's final aria, musically a very powerful piece comparable to any of the Queen of the Night's arias in *The Magic Flute*, because he found the staging of the piece difficult and because he was worried about the length of the opera (Rushton 1993: 80). Many modern productions, however, prefer to retain it because it is such a striking piece of music.

⁸ Mozart completed the composition of *Idomeneo* in Munich while Varesco remained in Salzburg. Mozart was worried about the length of the opera and concerned with dramatic effect. Varesco was annoyed that he was asked to rewrite his libretto and worried about his fee. Leopold acted as a mediator (Osborne 1997: 143–9). We are, in Mozart's letter to his father, 'allowed a rare glimpse into the composer's workshop ... in particular, into his efforts to shape a text.' (Spaethling 2000: 209). The correspondence between Strauss and his librettist Hofmannsthal also provides us with valuable insights into the composition of *Elektra*. This will be discussed further later on.

⁹ Hyginus in his *Fabulae*, LXXXI *Proci Helenae* lists Idomeneus among the suitors of Helen. He was thus bound by his oath to fight when Paris stole her from Menelaus. (Marshall ed. 1993).

¹⁰ All translations from the ancient Greek are mine.

¹¹ It is also interesting to note that Apollodorus mentions earlier in his *Epitome* that Idomeneus was the son of Deucalion who led forty ships of Cretan warriors against Troy (Frazer tr. 1921, *Epitome*, iii.13).

¹² See Servius' commentary on *Aeneid*, 3.121 in Thilo and Hagen eds. (1923: 365). For biographical data consult Howatson (1989: 518).

¹³ All translations from the operas are from the recordings used for this article.

¹⁴ He comes close to it, though, in Euripides' *Orestes*. In that play both he and Electra are sentenced to death. Such is Electra's love for her brother that she is prepared to join him in death but it turns out not to be necessary. Euripides invented this plot (West 1987: 27).

¹⁵ Mozart's *Idomeneo* is the only operatic version of this story still in the repertoire of opera houses. The other versions have fallen out of favour with the opera-going public and the artistic directors of the opera houses.

¹⁶ It is always very difficult to give an exact date for the birth of any new genre but the earliest opera still in the repertoire is Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607), although this is not the first treatment of the story. For a chronological table of the settings of the Orpheus myth see Sternfeld (1993: 2).

¹⁷ The Orpheus myth was a key plot for early operas. The version of the myth used was mostly based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Books 10 and 11). The myth had to be Christianized to make it more acceptable. This process had begun much earlier, though, as with increased literacy it became necessary to moralize away what was pagan and erotic in the stories. A good example is

Ovide moralisé, an early fourteenth-century compilation (Sternfeld 1993: 11). For the importance of ancient Greek theatre at the inception of the genre of opera see also McDonald (1994: 103–4).

¹⁸ Monteverdi himself wrote two endings for his *Orfeo*: in the 1607 finale Orfeo loses Eurydice and leaves the stage after he meets the Maenads. It is not clear whether the audience is meant to assume that they will subsequently kill him. In the 1609 finale Apollo takes Orfeo to heaven (Sternfeld 1993: 25–30). The other well known treatment of the myth is Gluck's *Orfeo and Euridice* (1762) in which the couple is re-united in the end.

¹⁹ For the similarity of Mozart's operas to ancient Greek theatre see McDonald (1994: 104).

²⁰ On the importance of the castrati in eighteenth-century opera see Einstein (1946: 390).

²¹ Mozart was not happy with his voice. In a letter to his father Leopold dated 8 November 1780 he expressed doubts about his suitability for the role (Spaethling 2000: 210) and a few days later in his letter dated 15 November he complained about dal Prato's 'uneven voice' (ibid. 215).

²² Even when working in an old-fashioned tradition Mozart was a trendsetter who anticipated Italian practice by more than a decade (McClymonds 1996: 451).

²³ The hero, Prince Tamino, is on a quest for truth and knowledge and undergoes several trials before he attains enlightenment and finds true love with Pamina. Even though he is a prince, Tamino is on a humanistic search for truth and he has to prove his worth before he can attain it.

²⁴ For a good discussion of an opera-goer of the time see Cole (1998: 141–3) and Hertz. (1989: 73).

²⁵ Strauss also composed his opera in a commercial environment.

²⁶ Quotations from the article by Lesley Sharpe in ENO, *The Magic Flute* programme for the 1999–2000 season. Opera programmes for the major opera houses usually contain several articles on the context of the opera, the music, the staging and the performance history. These can be a very useful guide for further research.

²⁷ for a detailed discussion of Mozart's association with Archbishop Colloredo see Sadie, 2006, 257–96.

²⁸ For an account of *Idomeneo*'s reception and subsequent disappearance from the repertoire see Robbins (1995: 34).

²⁹ Although opera lost its overt religious function, religious themes continued to be important in some operas, as, for example, in Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) with its theme of spiritual redemption. At the same time other operas had more secular themes, like Strauss's *Elektra*. *Idomeneo* itself, despite the supernatural element, is mostly concerned with issues of kingship.

³⁰ The theme of human sacrifice is another favourite subject of *opera seria* (Rushton 1993: 69).

³¹ There is no record of a daughter of Priam called Ilia. In Roman mythology Ilia was a Vestal Virgin and the mother of Romulus and Remus by Mars (Howatson 1989: 294). This is another instance of the freedom with which the Classics were treated in the eighteenth century.

³² An interesting comparison is with Euripides' *Andromache*, the story of the captive Trojan princess in the court of Neoptolemus, king of Phthia. The story develops in a different direction, however, as Andromache is Neoptolemus' concubine and the rivalry between her and his wife Hermione is not

for his love. Andromache wants to ensure the safety of her son Molossus and herself, while Hermione is ruled by pride. See Andromache's prologue (Diggle ed. 1984, *Andromache*, 1–55).

³³ Strauss's music for his heroine was equally extreme and the most modern he ever wrote. It is almost as if the figure of Electra demands such an extreme musical treatment.

³⁴ After Orestes' matricide one has to wonder what sort of welcome Elettra would receive. After all she fled from Argos to Crete. Maybe, as Idomeneo assures her, Idamante will defend her interests (Mozart, *Idomeneo* 1996: 93).

³⁵ It is interesting to note that in Sophocles' *Electra* Chrysothemis plays that role in relation to Electra, who is the heroine.

³⁶ The news is brought to her by her sister Chrysothemis and this scene between the sisters helps to draw attention to the strength of Electra's devotion to her father. Chrysothemis is prepared to appease their mother by not openly mourning their father. She thus gains better treatment for herself.

³⁷ Mozart changed Danchet's story in which Idomeneo competes with his son for Ilia's love (Rushton 1993: 73).

³⁸ This makes her a true heroine of the Enlightenment, whereas Elettra represents the old ideals. For Mozart as a 'product of the Enlightenment' see (McDonald 2001: 84–7).

³⁹ The Aeschylean Apollo plays the same role in the *Oresteia*. He instructs Orestes to avenge his father and then has to protect him against the Furies. Athena, however, is the one who ultimately manages to satisfy both parties.

⁴⁰ Also compare Gluck's choice of a happy ending for his version of the Orpheus myth.

⁴¹ There are, however, some subversive elements in the opera. For example, Idamante frees the Trojan captives in the beginning of the opera (McDonald 2001: 68).

⁴² See Sadie's (1996: 14) introduction to *Idomeneo* and Osborne (1997: 165).

⁴³ McDonald (2001: 83–4) believes that the audience is meant to infer that Elettra dies. This seems likely, but Mozart does not expand on this because Elettra is not a major character.

⁴⁴ For a good discussion of Mozart's problems with Raaff see Hertz (1974: 517–43). For a glimpse into the problems Mozart had with Raff see his letters to his father Leopold in Spaethling 2000: 214–15 (dated 15 November 1780), 218–19 (dated 29 November 1780) and 220–21 (dated 5 December 1780).

⁴⁵ For a copy of the original advertisement for *Elektra* see Roth (1954: 20).

⁴⁶ In Britain Schikaneder's contribution to the libretto has dominated the critical discussion of *Die Zauberflöte*, whereas in Austria it has long been decided in his favour. See Branscombe's article in ENO, *The Magic Flute* programme for the 1999–2000 season.

⁴⁷ It is also interesting to note that Mozart had composed other operas before *Idomeneo* but this was his first 'mature' work in this genre (Headington et al. 1987: 96). For a detailed discussion of Mozart's earlier efforts in *opera seria*: *Mitridate re di Ponto* (1770) and *Lucio Silla* (1772) see Sadie (1980: 685 and 689–90). He also wrote one more opera along neo-classical lines before his death *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791).

⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that the naming of Agamemnon this early in the opera is one of the most important changes that Strauss made to Hofmannsthal's original. He spelt out what the poet only suggested. For an analysis of the tonal structure of this scene see Gilliam (1991: 82–6).

⁴⁹ In the first major article on Strauss's *Elektra*, published in the same year the opera appeared, Paul Bekker, one of the leading musical critics of the period, praised Strauss's 'bold spirit'. In Bekker's opinion, no other opera composer was Strauss's equal in originality in the year 1909 (Bekker 1992: 404).

⁵⁰ In his *Recollections* Strauss records Kaiser Wilhelm II's opinion of *Salome*: 'I am sorry that Strauss composed *Salome* I really like the fellow but it will only do him a lot of damage.' Strauss ironically comments that: 'The damage enabled me to build the villa at Garmisch.' (Jefferson 1973: 104).

⁵¹ Forsyth (1989: 20) believes that Hofmannsthal did not read *Studies in Hysteria* before 1904 at the earliest but her opinion seems to be in the minority. Even if she is right, Freud and Breuer's work was being discussed in the intellectual circles to which Hofmannsthal belonged (Jefferson 1973: 120). Goldhill (2002: 150) also believes that Hofmannsthal had read Freud. See also Mann (1964: 68).

⁵² For Hofmannsthal's interest in psychoanalysis and how it affected his view of ancient Greece see Goldhill (2002: 143–5).

⁵³ Compare with Hofmannsthal (*Elektra* 1908: 23). For an analysis of the tonal structure of this scene see Gilliam (1991: 88–92).

⁵⁴ This point will be raised again in the discussion of how Hofmannsthal changed the classical story.

⁵⁵ Wagner himself was influenced by fifth-century BCE Greek tragedy, in particular Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Burian 1997: 266).

⁵⁶ Strauss's first opera *Guntram* (1894) was a reworking of the Wagnerian models Strauss had inherited.

⁵⁷ Incidentally *Tristan and Isolde* was Strauss's favorite opera together with Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.

⁵⁸ Hofmannsthal approved of Goethe's neoclassicism but he found *Iphigeneia* cold. His *Elektra* was designed to 'revitalise' the genre (Forsyth 1989: 21).

⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that it was after seeing Gertrud Eysoldt as *Salome* in Reinhardt's 1902 production at the Kleines Theater in Berlin that Strauss became interested in turning Wilde's play into an opera. Reinhardt was again instrumental in rousing Strauss's interest in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*.

⁶⁰ See also Goldhill (2002: 146).

⁶¹ See in particular Strauss's letter dated 11 March 1906 where he says: 'The only question I have not finally decided in my mind ... is whether, immediately after *Salome*, I shall have the strength to handle a subject so similar to it in many respects.' (Strauss and von Hofmannsthal 1961: 3). See also Hofmannsthal's reply of 27 April 1906 (ibid. 3–4). See also Gilliam (1991: 55–6).

⁶² Even the romantic hero in *Der Rosenkavalier* was written for the female voice, something very unusual by 1911 when romantic roles were usually sung by tenors who replaced the castrati of early opera. This had been the usual practice throughout the Romantic period of opera.

⁶³ See also Bremer (1994: 115) on Elektra's unnatural attachment to her father.

⁶⁴ The frequent allusions to animals are a sign of Elektra's dehumanization (Gilliam 1991: 27).

⁶⁵ For the importance of the blood imagery in the Hofmannsthal–Strauss version see Gilliam (1991: 27).

⁶⁶ Gilliam (1991: 30) believes that it is the character of Klytämnestra that 'best exemplifies the difference between the worlds of Sophocles and Hofmannsthal'.

⁶⁷ In Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* Clytemnestra welcomes the strangers, not knowing that her son is among them (Garvie tr. 1986, *Choephoroi*, 668). Then after Aegisthus is murdered, she pleads for her life unsuccessfully (ibid. 908–28). In Sophocles only Clytemnestra's voice is heard while she is being killed (March ed. & tr. 2001, *Electra*, 1404–16). The difference with Hofmannsthal's version is that in the original tragedy she has a few lines to speak asking for mercy. In Euripides' *Electra* she is again heard pleading for her life (Cropp ed. 1988, *Electra* 1165–67).

⁶⁸ Compare Sophocles and Clytemnestra's last lines in the play (March ed. & tr. 2001, *Electra*, 1411, 1415 and 1417).

⁶⁹ For an analysis of the tonal structure of this scene see Gilliam (1991: 99–100).

⁷⁰ Interestingly Chrysothemis is prepared to marry even a peasant, which might be an allusion to Euripides' *Electra*. In that play Elektra is forced by her mother and Aegisthus to marry a peasant.

⁷¹ For an analysis of the tonal structure of this scene between the sisters see Gilliam (1991: 86–8).

⁷² For a musical analysis of this second encounter between the sisters see Gilliam (1991: 92–5).

⁷³ For an analysis of the tonal structure of the *anagnorisis* scene see Gilliam (1991: 96–9).

⁷⁴ As mentioned earlier, Mozart had no say in the selection of the singers. His cast, like his libretto, were selected for him and, therefore, he tailored his music to suit the singers' capabilities. Strauss, however, was free to create a difficult soprano role for Elektra as the story demanded it.

⁷⁵ Clytemnestra's speech when she hears the news (Garvie tr. 1986, *Choephoroi*, 691–9). It is partly for show but there is a note of genuine grief in her words. Compare Clytemnestra's response in Sophocles:

O Zeus what to make of this, should I call it fortunate
or unfortunate but advantageous. It is painful that I
preserve my life by means of my loss. (Sophocles, *Electra* 766–8)

Euripides does not use the deception of the false news of Orestes' death. Instead his Elektra pretends to have given birth and calls her mother to participate in the ten-day sacrifice for the birth of a son (Cropp tr. 1988, *Electra*, 1124–38).

⁷⁶ Aeschylus' *anagnorisis* scene is by far the most elaborate (see Garvie tr. 1986, *Choephoroi*, 164–234). Sophocles simplified it and Euripides parodied Aeschylus. Strauss asked Hofmannsthal to

write a few more lines for the recognition scene because he believed this a scene of great importance (Strauss and von Hofmannsthal 1961: 16–17).

⁷⁷ See the opera for Orest's moment of clarity and Elektra's prompting (Strauss 1997: 130–2).

⁷⁸ In Sophocles' version Orestes and Aegisthus exchange a few grim words, but in the opera Orest has nothing further to say once he enters the palace to kill Klytämnestra (McDonald 1994: 118).

⁷⁹ For an analysis of the tonal structure of this scene see Gilliam (1991: 101–6).

⁸⁰ For his stage directions for Elektra's wild dance see Hofmannsthal (1908: 57–8).

⁸¹ See also Gilliam (1991: 101) on the 'culminating power' of this scene.

⁸² McDonald (2001: 118–29) sees Elektra as a heroine in the Homeric mould who fights for her father's cause. She is prepared to die in that cause and in Strauss's opera she does.

⁸³ This is reminiscent of Euripides' *Electra* when Elektra tricks her mother into entering the hut where Orestes is waiting to kill her. For an analysis of the tonal structure of this scene see Gilliam (1991: 100–1).

⁸⁴ This contrasts sharply with Sophocles' play, where after Aegisthus is forced indoors by Orestes his voice is not heard again. For his last exchange with Orestes see March ed. & tr. (2001, *Electra*, 1475–1507).

⁸⁵ See also Gilliam (1991: 7–17) for a discussion of the opera's reception in Germany and abroad.

⁸⁶ An example of a book that promoted this view is Otfried Muller's *Die Dorier* published in 1824. For details see Goldhill (2002: 149–50).

⁸⁷ *Salome* was still banned in Britain (ibid. 110).

⁸⁸ The king and queen attended the opening night and such was the demand for tickets that journalists could not get seats (ibid. 109).

⁸⁹ For a sample of the reviews published in England and the United States at the time (ibid. 129–38).

⁹⁰ In the nineteenth century the music that Gluck wrote for *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) was considered as 'encapsulating an image of true Greece' (ibid. 112). In terms of staging Ludwig Tieck's production of *Antigone* in 1841, with classical music by Mendelsohn and with its attempts to imitate classical dress and its antique-looking sets, became the standard way in which ancient Greek tragedy was represented on stage in the second half of the nineteenth century (Steiner 1984: 8).